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ABSTRACT

Twenty-eight composition teachers at a large university, a two-year college, and an engineering college, all of whom had taught composition through both the tutorial method and typical classroom methods, were interviewed regarding advantages and disadvantages of the two approaches. Among the advantages of tutorials mentioned were the chance to focus directly on students' unique writing needs, immediate feedback regarding student comprehension, improvement in student/teacher relationships and student attitudes, the possibility of a greater volume of writing than in the classroom approach, and dramatic improvements in students' writing. The most frequently mentioned disadvantage of tutorials was the time they require and their lack of cost effectiveness; other disadvantages were that tutorials are mentally and physically exhausting, sometimes tedious for the student, and provide no group identity or peer criticism. However, it was observed that many teachers who found tutorials exhausting created unnecessary extra work for themselves and that tedious tutorial sessions may have resulted from a lack of focus on students' writing. It appears likely that the success or failure of tutorials is largely dependent on teacher attitudes. It also appears that the tutorial method provides teachers with a great deal of power over students. (Writing samples are provided to show how a student's writing style was actually damaged through tutorials. A table of teachers' responses to the interview questions is also included.) (GT)

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TUTORIALS AND WRITING CLASSES:

A PILOT STUDY

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Dear to every composition teacher is the dream that somewhere there is a method of teaching composition which will benefit the writing process of every student who comes into contact with it; it is an academic Holy Grail. Issue after issue of learned journals is cluttered with articles, teacher fictions actually, declaring that the Grail has been found. But have many of these articles made long-lasting contributions to improving writing among our students? Not really. The innovations in teaching composition -- brilliant though they seem in the journals of our profession -- do not tell a complete story. These articles give an impression of unbridled success with rarely a mention of failure, rarely an explanation why some method does not work all the time. And any fledgling composition teacher can tell, with horror, stories of semesters wasted in approaches and methods which did not work.

So if you are looking for a teaching gimmick which "really works," you will not find it here. What you will find are interesting and important opinions on an increasingly popular approach to teaching composition---the writing tutorial.

Over the past three years, I have studied how tutorials are used to teach composition at three different colleges, differing in size, geographical location, and type of institution: the University of Massachusetts, Francis Marion College, and Clarkson College. These institutions are, respectively, a large state-supported university, a small business/liberal arts two-year school, and an engineering college. In order to study the

tutorial method and to compare it with typical classroom approaches to teaching composition, I interviewed twenty-eight teachers who had used both the tutorial method and the classroom method. The following set of short questions comprised the interview:

1) What advantages have you found in the classroom method of teaching composition?

2) What disadvantages?

3) What advantages have you found in the tutorial method of teaching composition?

4) What disadvantages?

5) How do the two methods compare in the time spent by the teacher?

6) How do the two methods compare in improving students' writing?

7) How do the two methods compare in student attitude toward the course?

8) If you taught this course again, which method would you use?

The questions were designed to be general; I wanted to elicit nuances as well as quantifiable answers. I wanted to start the teachers talking, and as it turned out their ramblings were often as informative---if not more so---as were there direct answers.

Before I discuss the results of the interviews, let me say a few words about the two methods I am examining. The classroom method used by the teachers I interviewed is typical of that used in many college-level writing courses: one teacher to twenty or more students meeting three times a week during which anything

from transformational grammar to the socio-economic awareness of ethnic groups might be discussed and written about in the eight or so assigned themes. The tutorials, on the other hand, consisted of one thirty minute session per student per week. The first fifteen minutes were spent by the tutor reading, and occasionally commenting on, the student's paper. The last fifteen minutes were spent discussing the student's writing problems and improvement in the context of the paper, while planning a rewrite or the next paper. In each of the twenty-eight cases, the classroom method and the tutorials were used in elected writing courses. This is an important point to remember as it pertains to speculations I will make later concerning the use of tutorials.

The bulk of the rest of this paper consists of the responses of teachers during the interviews and of my reactions to those responses. The answers are interesting, informative, and not always what I had expected. The following chart graphically depicts the various responses to the questions listed above. Following the chart I will discuss my own observations concerning the teachers' answers as well as expand upon their particular reflections during each interview.

Question

1. What advantages have you found in the classroom method of teaching writing?

   a. the class is a forum for generating ideas----------8

   b. the class provides for peer criticism----------7

   c. the class provides a group identity----------7

   d. the class has no advantage----------6

2. What disadvantages have you found in the classroom method of teaching writing?

   a. the level of instruction has to be aimed at a median--9

   b. the classroom format removes writing from writers-----8

   c. the classroom format promotes poor student attention--6

   d. the class does not provide enough writing experience--5

3. What advantages have you found in the tutorial method of teaching writing?

   a. tutorials enable the teacher to focus directly on individual students' writing needs----------21

   b. tutors are immediately aware of students writing problems----------9

   c. tutorials make possible a greater volume of writing---7*

4. What disadvantages have you found in the tutorial method of teaching writing?

   a. tutorials require a great deal of time----------13

   b. only a small number of students can be seen per teacher per semester in tutorials----------12

   c. tutorials are mentally and physically exhausting------9

   d. tutorials are tedious for the student----------8

   e. tutorials provide no group identity----------7

   f. tutorials provide no peer criticism----------7

5. How do the two methods compare in the time spent by the teacher?

   a. more time required by tutorials----------13

   b. more time required by classes----------8

   c. no noticeable difference----------7

6. How do the two methods compare in improving students' writing?

   a. tutorials elicited dramatic improvement----------15

   b. tutorials elicited slightly more improvement----------7

   c. no noticeable difference----------6

7. How do the two methods compare in student attitudes toward the course?

   a. student attitudes were better in tutorials----------14

   b. student attitudes were better in classes----------6

   c. no noticeable difference----------8

8. If you taught a writing course again, which method would you choose?

   a. tutorials----------14

   b. classrooms----------7

   c. no preference----------7

OBSERVATIONS: ADVANTAGES OF TUTORIALS AND DISADVANTAGES OF CLASSES

Twenty-one faculty thought that the most important advantage of tutorials was that the instructor could focus directly on the individual student's unique writing needs. For example, if a student has a problem with paragraph organization, a common problem according to many of the teachers I interviewed, it can be dealt with---at once. Roger Garrison points out this virtue in "TEACHING WRITING: An Approach to Tutorial Instruction in Freshman Composition," adding that attempting to focus the student on other matters is, for the moment, not important.[1] This virtue of tutorials emphasizes one of the problems with the classroom approach. Nine teachers said that because of the widely varying degrees of competence among their writing students they felt compelled to aim classroom instruction at a median, which by its nature excludes students both above it and below it. The ones above the median are almost always bored, their development stifled. Those below it are lost, their convictions that they cannot write reinforced. Six of these nine teachers said that aiming at a median excluded probably no more than ten of their twenty students; one said, perhaps more forthrightly, that he felt aiming at a median level of instruction in a writing class touched the writing problems of only three or four of his students. In a class of twenty students, that excludes almost 85% from what the course is supposed to be about---improving writing.

A second advantage of tutorials, mentioned by eight of the teachers I talked with, is that the instructor is immediately aware of the student's comprehension or lack of it. One of the dicta teachers frequently tell students in writing classes is that the writer must be aware of and contend with the audience's understanding of the subject being written about. But how often are teachers guilty of ignoring their own advice when they write marginalia on students' papers? If these comments are read at all by students (which I doubt), what percentage of the critical profundity does the average student understand? Probably very little. But what these eight teachers mentioned was that if a comment is made to a student's face concerning a writing problem in his paper which is on the desk in front of him, it is obvious if he understands or not. And if he does not, the tutor can back up or repeat or question or re-emphasize until the point is clear. This advantage eliminates what eight teachers thought to be a problem in the classroom method: that writing removed from the writer cannot be taught; that students in the classroom might never understand what is being said about writing and, worse, that the teacher might never know. This feeling was so strong among six of the respondents that they volunteered: "there is no advantage to the classroom approach; if writing is being taught, it is a one-to-one communication," and "I am convinced that writing can only be taught by tutorials."

Growing out of the advantages of individual attention and immediate reaction-response is a third advantage of tutorials.

Half of the persons I interviewed said that there was a better student-teacher relationship, better student attitude, under the tutorial system. Ten of those fourteen attributed the better morale to the individual attention. One student confirmed this in a follow-up I made of student opinions. She said that in tutorials for the first time in her college career (she was a junior English major) she found a teacher who was actively interested in what she thought, in her unique abilities and inabilities. This is an unfortunate indictment---all too true, as we will admit to ourselves---of the way we teach composition. What this statement says about tutorials is that the interest and care of the instructor contributes to the interest and care of the student. If the student knows that the composition teacher is there to help the student write better, rather than to reinforce the student's prior convictions that he cannot write, attitude can't help but be better.

Fifteen teachers noticed a "dramatic improvement" in tutorial students' writing early in the semester, an improvement they attributed to individual attention on the students' writing problems. Seven others said that there was some improvement, and the remaining six agreed that "at least the students wrote no worse than when they started the course." Seven of the fifteen who witnessed to dramatic improvement said that it was followed by a period of levelling off. This is an important statement which I will examine later.

Finally, seven teachers said that they thought the most

important feature of tutorials is the volume of writing which can be produced. Peter Elbow[2] and Roger Garrison[3] agree with this evaluation; they carry it further, though, and contend that writing can be best learned one-to-one because the method allows more writing to be done, but most importantly, because one-to-one teaching allows close editorial input directly into the process of writing a paper, input which is characteristically absent in the classroom. It is this input, one teacher said, which shows students alternatives in their writing in handling subjects and in addressing audiences.

OBSERVATIONS: DISADVANTAGES OF TUTORIALS AND ADVANTAGES OF CLASSES

The most noted disadvantage of tutorials, pointed out by thirteen of the teachers interviewed, is the time that tutorials require; they found the tutorials more demanding of their energy as well. The real problem of a time disadvantage, however, is the cost and efficiency of running an English department. By the tutorial method, one teacher can handle one section of sixteen to twenty students per semester; no one I interviewed wanted to meet more than one section of tutorials per week. Consequently, if any other writing courses were being taught by the teachers, they were being taught by the classroom approach. On the other hand, the classroom method allows a teacher to handle up to three, and under duress, four sections of sixteen to twenty-five students apiece per semester---for a total of from forty-eight to one

hundred students. Considering this comparison of students per faculty member, a writing tutor who was also department chairperson, admitted that although he had had good results using tutorials they were not feasible on a department-wide basis. To use tutorials departmentwide, he said, would require more teachers than the budget could possibly support. The problem of cost-effectiveness is the most debillating case against the wide-spread use of tutorials for teaching writing.

Closely related to the problem of time required by tutorials is the concern which nine teachers expressed that tutorials are mentally and physically exhausting; eight also said that tutorials are tedious for the student. However, if we examine how the tutorials were used by these particular respondents, we will see that the source of tedium and exhaustion is in their use of tutorials and not in the tutorial method itself. Eight of the nine created unnecessary extra work for themselves. They required students' papers to be handed in a few days before the tutorial session so they could "give a thorough reading" to the papers, they still wrote extensive marginalia on students' papers, they wandered off on tangents during the tutorial causing the session to run to an hour or longer. Regarding the first of these causes of extra work, tutors said they "felt guilty" at not being able to read the students' papers thoroughly and "point out all the things wrong with it." Besides the attitudinal problem of the teacher approaching a student's work negatively, this extra reading creates one of the blocks to writing improve-

ment common in the classroom method: it provides more material (marginalia, notes to the student, etc.) than the student can of is willing to digest. Roger Garrison has some advice for those who feel compelled to over-correct a paper:

> Decide what the priorities to be corrected are; and then deal with these, one at a time. . . . ONE PROBLEM AT A TIME, AND THE MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEM FIRST is the proper correcting motto.[4]

Next, the key to solving the problem of wandering into tangential discussions is, simply, self-restraint. Tutors, if they are to be successful, can not allow themselves to stray into discussions of past experiences, literature, the weather unless these things pertain directly to the writing in question. One of the tutors I interviewed admitted that this was the hardest aspect of tutorials: "keeping things in a writing point of view." All of this applies to the remark on tedium for the students. If the tutor is obviously bored and exhausted, or if the student has to wait in a hallway thirty minutes past his assigned tutorial because a tutor is chatting about matters not related to writing, is it any wonder the student finds tutorials tedious?

The following episode is the most telling example of extra work created by a tutor. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this episode is the fact that this particular tutor did not find tutorials overly time-consuming, exhausting, or tedious. At this point, I would like to nominate this tutor for sainthood. He

began the semester with the regular three classes per week plus one tutorial per student per week. At mid-term he reduced the number of classes per week to two; with three weeks left in the semester he reduced it to one class per week. In addition to this, he required students to hand in papers three days prior to their tutorials; these papers he took home, red-pencilling errors and writing notes to the students. The tutorials were then spent discussing the errors he had found. In addition to all of this, he mimeographed students' papers for class discussion; he also made up a spelling list of the most frequently misspelled words in the students' papers. He volunteered a sadly enlightening comment during the interview when he said: "I'm not sure any of this worked." Neither am I.

SPECULATIONS ON THE USE AND ABUSE OF TUTORIALS

In the way of a conclusion, the answers of the interviewed teachers generate some advice about the use of tutorials: they are not for everybody. So much of the success or failure of tutorials depends upon the personality of the tutor that out of the twenty-eight teachers I talked with the successful tutors can be separated from the unsuccessful solely on the basis of the attitude with which they approach their task. And isn't this also the determinant of a good classroom teacher?

Those persons interested in adopting the tutorial approach, however, should be aware of the danger inherent in a one-to-one

method of teaching writing. Tutorials hold a frightening potential for power---far more than the power of the grade in a typical class. The ramifications of this power come from two sources: (1) the number of interviewed teachers who witnessed to "dramatic improvement" in students' writing, and (2) the increasing amount of research into the relationship of thought to language. First, let's look at the matter of improvement. What is improvement in writing? In a quantitative sense, we do not know. As teachers, we are still limited to our subjective judgment. If we contend that majority of writing teachers' judgments are good and accurate (which we do), we can still not claim universality. This is where, as one of the interview respondents put it, "if tutors are wrong, tutorials are dangerous." In light of our limitation to subjectivity, regardless of how accurate that might be, improvement in writing in our classes or in our tutorials must be defined as a student's progress toward the teacher's stylistic model. This opens up the broad likelihood that many of us are foisting off upon our students our own stylistic fetishes. Some may be evangelizing for a cumulative style, pointing out, as Christensen has, the urgency and clarity of a style which lilts along until it reaches a period. Desiring a style of measured stateliness, keeping time with an ancient music, some may urge periodicity. Some, even though we may find it hard to believe, preach centrally embedded modifiers. But stylistic imitation of itself is not a well-supported road to good writing. More and more writing researchers are supporting the idea that

good writing, really good writing, has to come from the integrity of the writer; it has to speak in the writer's own voice, to paraphrase Walker Gibson.[5]

The following example shows what can be done to a writer's voice in tutorials. In light of recent research into thought and language, we might also wonder what has been done to the writer herself? Selection I is taken from a student's paper at the beginning of a writing course which is to be taught by tutorials. Selection II is taken from the same student's work, though this time at the end of the semester.

I) Many corporations, due to the rapid expansion of business, have turned to computer technology to more accurately and adequately update their production methods. Large increases in computer storage and rapid access of information has generated a growing concern toward the lack of information safeguards.

II) The Anderson Company sells a wide variety of party snacks. The company is experimenting with different methods of introducing their new variety of corn chips. The test markets consist of three similar areas.

The sentences is Selection I are typical of the student's style at the beginning of the course. Most of the sentences in this paper were complex or compound/complex. The paper did contain many of the errors common to a beginning writer, especially a writer attempting a complex sentence structure; the subject-verb agreement error is sentence two is a good example. The sentences in Selection II are typical of the student's style

at the end of the course. Most of the sentences in this paper were simple, declarative; on the average they contained between eight and twelve words. A change in style, a simplification, has taken place; and it is shocking how many teachers look upon this change as an improvement. Too many of our colleagues are teaching writing by tearing down and starting over when we should be building on the materials a student already possesses. Mina Shaughnessy, at the Rutgers Conference on Teaching Writing, October 30-31, 1975, said it best:

> what we experience as confusion in students' writing is often part of a positive developement. Students advancing into new and unfamiliar linguistic territory tend to make new, more complex, more subtle errors as they try to use words and patterns they have never used before. . . . teachers need assignments and ways of "correcting" papers that do not discourage students from risking exploration. And they need to make certain that in testing and evaluating, they do not mistake such risk-taking and difficulty for "failure."[6]

Such advice applies to the teaching of all writing, but to the tutorial method in particular because of the uniquely powerful position of the tutor. For these reasons, tutorials should be elected and not forced upon either student or teacher.

In the final analysis, how do we evaluate tutorials? They seem to be effective in quickly eliciting change in a students' writing, they promote good teacher/student interaction, but they are not the most cost-effective method for teaching writing, especially at large universities. Tutorials are most effectively

characterized as a gamble. As long as tutors do not mistake risk-taking for failure, the gamble pays.

NOTES

[1] Roger Garrison, "TEACHING WRITING: An Approach to Tutorial Instruction in Freshman Composition," (Westbrook College, Portland, Maine: n.p., n.d.), pp. 7-8.

[2] Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 76-117.

[3] Garrison, pp. 7-12.

[4] Garrison, pp. 26-27.

[5] Walker Gibson, Persona (New York: Random House, 1969).

[6] Mina Shaughnessy in Steven Zemelman, "The Rutgers Conference on Teaching Writing: A Summary and an Assessment," CCC, 28 (February, 1977), 53.